DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 321 334 CS 507 252

AUTHOR Aiex, Nola Kortner
TITLE Debate and Communication Skills. ERIC Digest.
INSTITUTION ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading and Communication Skills, Bloomington, IN.
SPONS AGENCY Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
REPORT NO EDO-CS-90-09
PUB DATE Sep 90
CONTRACT RI88062001
NOTE 3p.
AVAILABLE FROM ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading and Communication Skills, Indiana University, 2805 E. 10th St., Suite 150, Bloomington, IN 47408-2698 (free with a stamped self-addressed envelope).
PUB TYPE Information Analyses - ERIC Information Analysis Products (071) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Audience Awareness; *Communication Skills; *Debate; Debate Format; Elementary Education; Intergenerational Programs; Middle Schools; Program Descriptions; Verbal Communication
IDENTIFIERS Debate Strategies; ERIC Digests; Florida

ABSTRACT

Debate is an activity which can help young children learn to be part of a team without experiencing the intense competition that is present in athletics. For children, a focus on developing communication skills rather than on competition in debate can help foster attitudes of open-mindedness, fairness, and tolerance for the viewpoints of others. Examples of successful programs aimed at young children include: (1) "Kidspeak," an after-school program for grades three through six designed to teach oral communication skills; (2) a Florida State Department of Education program for middle school students; and (3) a cross-generational debate program emphasizing communication skills developed as a 4-H project. (RS)

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ERIC Digest

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Indiana University
2805 E. 10th St., Suite 150
Bloomington, IN 47408-2698
(812) 855-5847

Debate and Communication Skills

by Nola Kortner Aiex

Most parents are happy when their elementary school age children manifest an interest in little league baseball, after-school soccer, or beginning track-and-field. Parents feel that athletics can teach their youngsters how to compete with others and also how to function as part of a team. There is, however, another activity which can help young children learn to be part of a team but which places less emphasis on competition and which is, in addition, less gender specific than athletics. That activity is debate.

According to one educator (Lybbert, 1985), the debate discipline has three goals: (1) the enhancement of critical thinking and reasoning abilities; (2) academic advancement or development; and (3) the promotion of communication skills. For young children, the focus can be on the development of oral communication skills. And beginning a debate program with young children in elementary school can go a long way toward removing the somewhat elitist aura that surrounds debate in high school and college.

KIDSPEAK

Littlefield and Littlefield (1989) have developed an innovative after-school program for grades three through six which was specifically designed to teach oral communication skills to children. The program is called KIDSPEAK and was initiated in 1987. Debate represents only one of the units contained in the program, along with such topics as oral reading, listening, creative expression, storytelling, communication etiquette, etc. Teachers who were interested in the debate activity were given a short training session and access to additional help if they felt they needed it.

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Debate concepts are presented to the children in simplified form in lessons lasting 15 or 20 minutes. Each lesson emphasizes a certain skill and contains a writing exercise. For example:

"Lesson #6: Good Behavior for the Answerer. When you are answering questions, there are certain rules you should follow:

- Stand so you may see the questioner and the audience.
- If the questioner asks you to keep your answers brief, you are obliged to do what you are told.
- It is not proper to answer a question with another question.
- When asked a question, the speaker may not ask anyone else to answer.

"Working in pairs, practice giving answers in a courteous way. Remember the rules and try to answer each question in as complete a way as possible.

"Now—write down some questions here that you can use in practice."

Debate topics were chosen by the children but were subject to teacher approval. The topics ranged from the personal (often chosen by the younger children) to the political and environmental—the Panama Canal Treaty and smokers' rights, for example. Carre (1987) describes a similar classroom project in which seven-year-olds debated the controversial environmental issue of the building of a new road to their town.

The KIDSPEAK project culminated in a debate presented for the students' parents who were pleased with the results and with their children's mastery of debate concepts at such a young age.

Middle Schools

The Florida Department of Education introduces debate into the curriculum as early as middle school or junior high school (Curriculum Frameworks grades 6-8, 1986). A program such as KIDSPEAK would be an excellent introduction for the more structured course in speech and debate for middle schools. The Florida program outlines its major concepts/content as follows: "The purpose of this course is to introduce the fundamentals of formal and informal communication. The content should include, but not be limited to, forms of oral communication, techniques of group discussion, fundamentals of parliamentary procedure, elements of debate and debate activities, basic techniques of public speaking, and techniques of evaluation." Among the 11 aims for successfully completing the course are (1) use the minimum essentials of parliamentary procedure; (2) utilize fundamental concepts of debating in debate activities; and (3) identify careers related to successful debating skills.

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Since the experts generally agree that communication apprehension increases as the child passes through adolescence, perhaps the earlier introduction of speech/debate courses in the curriculum would allow the student to acquire communication skills more easily.

A Cross-Generational Program

A cross-generational debate program that emphasizes communication skills was developed as a 4-H project in Pennsylvania. Atwater (1984) describes a successful project that included two classes of elementary school children from two different schools who debated the proposal "Resolved, that nuclear power should become our country's primary source for developing electricity in the future." Judges were senior students from the 4-H program, and an adult leader served as an overall moderator. The project generated a sheet entitled "Helpful Tips for the Debater," and successive topics were selected from discussions at 4-H meetings.

The tips sheet includes tips for before the debate (such as, "when introduced, smile and look at the audience"); during the debate ("try to use words that create clear pictures"); and after the debate ("try to evaluate your own presentation"). Additionally, 10 tips on delivery were enumerated—tips which could serve for anyone intent on improving his or her communication skills:

- If you can, practice speaking into a tape recorder. Play it back to yourself. See how many words you slur, mumble, or mispronounce.
- Always practice, but never memorize. Use of notecards should be kept to a minimum.
- Stress the important issues by pausing and/or increasing your volume.
- Gesture naturally, or not at all. Never force gestures.
- Use vocal variety. Do not speak in a monotone.
- Speak clearly, slowly, distinctly.
- Make sure that you have adequate volume.
- Remember to look at the audience, your opponent, and the judge—establish eye contact.
- Watch nervous mannerisms, like playing with your hair, or tapping your pencil on the desk.
- Remember to relax.

Expert Opinions

Sodikow (1985) believes that debate helps students (1) develop the emotional maturity to win and lose graciously; (2) acquire the social skills necessary to work with a colleague and compete against other students; and (3) use spoken English in an increasingly sophisticated way. Huston (1985) stresses that the student should be encouraged to become adaptable to many different styles of communication. McClain (1989) argues that debate should be seen as a cooperative rather than a competitive endeavor.

Some educators feel that debate should become more audience centered and focused on community issues rather than on tournaments (Stepp, 1989). Many college students who are involved in debate feel that the emphasis on tournament debating makes them too argumentative in everyday life. For younger children, a focus on developing communication skills rather than on competition in debate could foster attitudes of open-mindedness, fairness, and tolerance for the viewpoints of others. (Atwater, 1984)

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Nola Kortner Aiex is the Assistant Director of the ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading and Communication Skills.

This publication was prepared with funding from the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education, under contract no. RI88062001. Contractors undertaking such projects under government sponsorship are encouraged to express freely their judgment in professional and technical matters. Points of view or opinions, however, do not necessarily represent the official view or opinions of the Office of Educational Research and Improvement.